

International Development Committee

Oral evidence: Promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities: the UK Government approach, HC 931

Tuesday 11 January 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 11 January 2022.

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Members present: Sarah Champion (Chair); Mr Richard Bacon; Chris Law; Nigel Mills; Mr Virendra Sharma.

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Witnesses

[I:](#) Saidi Zirhumana, Deputy Director, Support Office for Peacebuilding in the DRC; Denisa Delić, Advocacy Director, International Rescue Committee UK.

[II:](#) Savita Pawnday, Executive Director, Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect; Natalie Samarasinghe, Chief Executive Officer, United Nations Association—UK.



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Saidi Zirhumana and Denisa Delić.

Q1 **Chair:** Welcome to the International Development Select Committee's first session on promoting dialogue and preventing atrocities. We are very fortunate to have two panels today. On our first panel is Saidi, who is speaking to us from the DRC, and Denisa, who is speaking to us from the International Rescue Committee here in London. I wonder, Saidi, if you could start by introducing yourself properly and telling us a little about your organisation and the work that you do, please.

Saidi Zirhumana: Thank you very much for having me. It is my pleasure to be part of this panel. My name is Saidi Zirhumana. I am deputy director of Bureau de Soutien pour la Consolidation de la Paix. People call us Support Office in English, or Bureau de Soutien in short. Bureau de Soutien is an organisation based in the DRC. Our head office is in Goma, where we are currently.

Our post is searching for lasting peace and a lasting solution to the endemic instability that some of you may be aware has ravaged the Democratic Republic of the Congo. We do this through a combination of local peacebuilding actors. We focus more on building the skills and capacity of local peacebuilding organisations for them to be more resilient, cohesive and accountable to the communities they serve, in order to stop violence and build sustainable peace in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Q2 **Chair:** Denisa, could you tell us a little about your role and your organisation?

Denisa Delić: My name is Denisa Delić. I am the advocacy director at the International Rescue Committee UK. Thank you for inviting me and the IRC to give evidence to this very important inquiry. As someone with Balkan roots, I am personally pleased to see the inquiry focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina, so thank you very much.

The International Rescue Committee is a humanitarian organisation with 17,000 employees across 40 different sites across the globe. We have over 20,000 volunteers in 200 field sites and we are operational in many of the most severe humanitarian emergencies, where we work with families who have fled atrocities in Syria, Bangladesh, Myanmar, South Sudan and Ethiopia.

I am here to give evidence today on how the work that we see in the different places where we operate can contribute towards the bigger picture of atrocities that can occur if we do not tackle the root causes and if we do not respond to violations, as they occur, through stronger accountability mechanisms.

Q3 **Chair:** Denisa, we are going to start by asking some questions of you, and then we will move on to Saidi. In recent years, can you tell us what



trends the International Rescue Committee has seen in conflict, atrocities and indeed in the instability around the world?

Denisa Delić: We are seeing a number of different trends. One of the key trends that we are very concerned about is the increase in violations of international humanitarian law—which I will refer to as IHL for short—which are becoming more and more frequent in different conflict contexts. Parties to the conflict across different conflict zones are increasingly and openly violating IHL, and that includes actors such as Russia in Syria, the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and non-state-actor groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria. They are committing a number of violations, which I will discuss now.

The reason we are concerned about it is because we are seeing these increasing violations happening with impunity. This is what we at the IRC call this new age of impunity. We are particularly concerned about how it is playing out across four specific areas. The first is attacks on civilians, who are about 70% of victims in today's conflicts. Some 85% of armed conflicts are taking place in populated areas, which puts civilians at greater risk than ever.

The second trend that we are seeing, which is increasing rather than decreasing, is sexual violence in times of conflict. Gender-based violence rates increase as the use of violence can become normalised in conflict settings. Sexual violence is commonly used as a tactic of war, and it is estimated that around one in five refugees or displaced women have been subjected to sexual violence, which would amount to around 14 million women worldwide. This is only the tip of the iceberg. We know that IHL violations are notoriously hard to track and monitor in difficult settings, but gender-based violence still remains one of the most severely underreported violations that we see.

The third violation that we are seeing in different conflicts is attacks on aid workers and aid provision. Today, an average of 120 aid workers are killed each year, which is more than double the average 15 years ago. Attacks on aid workers, including national staff, in humanitarian settings have increased by an average of 11% in the last five years. The deaths of two Save the Children colleagues in Myanmar recently is a tragic reminder of the everyday reality that aid workers face operating in hugely challenging contexts. It is not only civilians but also attacks on civilian infrastructure, such as schools and hospitals. We are seeing those become increasingly common, particularly, for example, in Syria, where we have seen at least 595 attacks on more than 350 health facilities across the country.

Lastly, the denial of humanitarian aid and access is a very worrying trend; we are, again, seeing an increase rather than a decrease. That is related to direct attacks on aid workers. It is also a violation of Geneva conventions and can be a war crime, yet the number of countries that have challenges with constraints on operating and access has more than doubled in 2021 relative to the year before. We are concerned that the



restrictions on aid are increasingly seen as normal. One reason may be because they do not attract as much attention and outrage as some of the other violations, yet they are one of the biggest reasons for the suffering of millions of people across different conflicts. The question then is why these trends are moving in this direction.

Q4 **Chair:** Denisa, let me pause you there. You said that these atrocities were happening with a sense of impunity. Where has that come from, and is that an accurate feeling that the actors have?

Denisa Delić: The reason we think this sense of impunity has come about is what I was just starting to say. There are four reasons that we have outlined in our recent report about the state of the world, in particular in relation to the violations that we see occurring in these different conflicts.

Chair: Can we have just a summary, please?

Denisa Delić: The first is state failures. More states are failing to fulfil their basic responsibilities towards their citizens. The second is diplomatic failure. Peacemaking is in retreat. Geopolitical wrangling makes it very difficult to make progress in multilateral forums. The third is legal failure, which, for us, means that the system of international law, with rights for citizens and responsibilities for states, is in retreat. There can be a cycle whereby, if it happens and does not get tackled, it increases the risk of it happening again. The last is operational failure. The system of humanitarian aid that exists to fill the gaps created by state, legal and diplomatic failure depends on access, funding and global co-operation, but the system is currently overwhelmed by economic, social and political breakdown. We see these four drivers as features of what is creating the conditions where we are seeing a rise in these IHL violations.

Q5 **Chair:** You paint a very bleak picture. Looking forward, are there particular areas, countries or regions that you are concerned about when you think about atrocities?

Denisa Delić: In the report, we mention 10 crises that feature for different reasons. I do not have the time to go through each one, but I am very happy to share that with the Committee after today's session. I will mention two that particularly exemplify the issues that I am talking about today.

One is Yemen. It will not be unfamiliar to anyone at the IDC that that is a real case study of the impact of protracted crises over the last six years that have progressively destroyed livelihoods and critical systems and have made it that much harder to deliver aid in country, but also to hold parties to the conflict accountable for their actions in country. We predict that the conflict will persist this year and beyond, given the lack of diplomatic progress. There have been localised ceasefires that have not translated into a wider peace process.



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There have been some welcome initiatives, one of them being the 2018 Stockholm agreement that former Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, led. While that was a very positive effort at attempting to move the dial and prevented, at the time, the Saudi-led coalition from moving towards Hodeidah, one of the key ports, it has not led to a wider agreement. This back-and-forth takes away the progress that has been made and exacerbates the needs and conditions on the ground even further.

Q6 **Chair:** What is the second area?

Denisa Delić: The second area is Syria. Again, it is one of the countries that we feature in our top 10 list. The reason I mention Syria is because it is a particularly tragic example of what we describe as the poster child for this age of impunity, where there is a full range of outlawed tactics of war being used against civilians—everything from chemical weapons to starvation and targeting critical civilian infrastructure such as schools and hospitals.

While the conflict, in recent years, has shifted into a new phase following a number of different local ceasefires, we think that the IHL violations in country, because they have been normalised, could continue should there be a spike in violence, which we think there may be. Again, we remain concerned about the potential that, if the Syrian Government were to launch another offensive to retake areas outside of its control, more than 3 million civilians living in these areas, alongside the hospitals, clinics and schools that support them, would all be at risk.

Chair: Thank you. We share your concerns.

Q7 **Chris Law:** I want to touch particularly on financing for projects on the ground. As you know, the UK Government have cut their official development assistance by over 50%, and their cross-Government conflict, stability and security fund has been cut by over £500 million. I want to ask what impact, if any—I am sure there will be one—you expect this to have on the risk of global atrocities. Are there impacts happening already?

Denisa Delić: As you say, the cuts have been deep across a number of areas. For humanitarian aid, it has been 40% to 50% and has impacted a number of different programmes that we deliver in different countries—everything from the provision of education to health and protection services. Due to certain sensitivities and also for the sake of time, I will focus on one particular example, but, if the Committee is interested, I am very happy to follow up separately with more.

An example that particularly demonstrates the impact of some of the cuts to aid and how that can translate to exacerbating conditions on the ground that allow for these violations to happen is cutting protection programming. Protection programming tends to be one of the programmes that gets cut at the beginning of any decision to cut programmes, because the measures of success are less tangible. The



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idea is to prevent violence from happening, which is not as easily measured as food items or medicine being delivered.

The fact that that is already at risk exacerbates the overall global picture, but we had a post in Syria that was funded 100% by the FCDO, which has now been cut. The reduced funding for protection monitoring and reports and assessments targeting marginalised groups will lead to less evidence for programmatic interventions aimed at helping these groups. Of course, protection monitoring is key to understanding the implications of attacks on civilians and civilian infrastructure, which means that our ability to adapt as an operational agency is also impacted. They are absolutely essential to our ability to respond to issues on the ground and should be seen as a vital package alongside the provision of other life-saving goods.

I absolutely agree that the cuts have had an impact. At the moment, we just want to focus on making sure that the remaining funding that is being decided is going to the right places.

Q8 **Chris Law:** Would you be able to write to the Committee with other examples that you have not mentioned?

Denisa Delić: I am very happy to.

Chair: Saidi, we would like to turn to you now. My colleague Virendra Sharma will start the questions.

Q9 **Mr Sharma:** You have been involved in an FCDO-funded project in the DRC, the purpose of which is to strengthen networks that prevent and respond to violence. What does the project involve and why is it necessary in the DRC?

Saidi Zirhumana: I will be honest; I will share the budget with you after consulting the exact budget—I do not want to speculate—but the budget was not enough to run the programme. The situation in the DRC, especially in the east, if I can explain it in this way, is not focused in just one area; it takes in the eastern part of the DRC and goes outside the border, to the Great Lakes region.

The kind of programme that we want in that specific area needs more, because we have been involved only for a nine-month period. Our involvement came in such a short period of time and just covers one area, to support the local organisation. We first do mapping and support the local organisation. I will share with you what we organised for the period that we have been working on the project. The project was in a short period of time during which we could not finish the whole programme of the intended results that we wanted to see.

Q10 **Mr Sharma:** This project that you are involved in started in 2019 and is going to complete this year. In your view, has it made a difference so far?



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Saidi Zirhumana: I would say that it has made an impact so far. The impact that it has made already is that we established at least six working groups in different districts or *territoires*. We already have a system to collect information and to prevent atrocities. We have examples that I will share with you. We are starting to establish a community-based system—*[Interruption.]*

Q11 **Chair:** Saidi, your internet is really unstable. Would it be possible to switch off your video but keep the sound so that we can hear you? We really want to hear what you are saying. If you could give us that example of what you are doing, that would be really helpful.

Saidi Zirhumana: I was talking about the programme that we implemented, called community-based reintegration. It is the best one in the community, because it involves all the community members to get moving. We call it a community-based early warning mechanism, which we implemented in the province of Ituri, with the support that we received from the UK for that project. We believe that it made a big contribution to the community, because we now have, in different districts, different network groups that collect and analyse data and distribute it to local authorities or to MONUSCO, which is part of the UN that is working in the DRC. Together, with the establishment of that system, we can already see where there has been prevention of atrocity in the community we are working with.

Q12 **Mr Sharma:** If projects like yours did not exist, what would be the consequences?

Saidi Zirhumana: The consequences would be dire. As some of you may know, the eastern part is the worst part in the country, if not in the whole of Africa, where there are a lot of atrocities happening. There are human rights violations and a lot of things happening there. With that system in place, it has helped the community to avoid the atrocities that might occur in their communities. It helps a lot. I have evidence that people send to us or our partners, showing how it has helped them. I would be delighted to share with you afterwards the evidence and testimony that we have received from the community who live in the area where we are working.

Chair: Yes, we would like to receive that, if that is possible, please, Saidi. I am now pleased to invite Nigel Mills, who has just joined the Committee, to ask his first question. Welcome, Nigel.

Q13 **Nigel Mills:** Thank you, Chair. Saidi, thank you for your time. Could you tell me how easy it was for you to find funding for the project you are doing? If you wanted more money to extend the project, do you think you could find funding for that?

Saidi Zirhumana: It has not always been easy, but we have a partnership with a UK-based organisation called Peace Direct. It was through Peace Direct that we were able to be funded, but it was not easy. I would say to the UK and aid agencies that one of the challenges we are



going through as a local organisation is accessing or reaching the level where we can receive direct funding from UK aid. We got it through our partner, Peace Direct, and I am grateful that we had a partnership with such an organisation that helps local communities with locally led initiatives. We are proud of having a partnership with such an organisation that values the work of local organisations.

Q14 Nigel Mills: Why do you say it is not easy for you to find the funding? Is it because, when you approach potential donors, they want very measurable outcomes and it is easier to justify vaccinating 1,000 children than it is to justify the work you are doing? Is the problem that you have showing tangible, provable outcomes rather than slow and maintainable progress?

Saidi Zirhumana: I would say that the procedures we face from the donors are very long and do not give a chance to local organisations. We work with local organisations that have the solution to their problems and want their voice to be heard. They want to participate, from the start of a programme or project until the end. They want to get involved in all stages of the programme. It has been difficult for us to get a donor who comes directly to the organisation and finds out what locally led initiatives can benefit the community.

Most of the time, our work is to focus on building the skills and capacity of organisations. We have a situation in the DRC, which you might be aware of, whereby local civil society organisations are viewed by donors as not being coherent, resilient or accountable. That is why we started to work with organisations to create that atmosphere and that awareness, so that we build the organisations in a way that they can be resilient, cohesive and accountable, so that they can approach organisations or funders, and so that they can have direct access to funders, rather than passing through other organisations.

Q15 Chair: Denisa, is there is a role for development organisations and indeed humanitarian aid organisations in atrocity prevention? Could you give some examples?

Denisa Delić: Yes, absolutely. The role that the IRC plays is useful in two particular ways. One, as I mentioned in the example that I gave of Syria and the cuts that we had there, is that we have people in post who play this protection monitoring role. They can see things that are happening more quickly than higher-level postings in country. They are in direct discussion with local organisations. As Saidi mentioned, they are crucial in tackling the community-level work that needs to be done to prevent the full scale of atrocities. Having people on the ground in those posts, who are in dialogue with a number of different actors, is really important to then signal back when things are changing and where the dynamics are getting more difficult, and simply to collect evidence and report that back.



The other side of the picture, of course, is tackling root causes. The same programme that I mentioned in Syria was also funding economic livelihood centres, providing women with the ability to go out and earn their own money or just to avoid the negative coping mechanisms that we see in conflicts across the globe. If it is providing health provisions or education services, that all adds up to trying to tackle root causes that avoid leading to tensions between communities or whatever else. It is both a prevention-first approach—not just by organisations like the IRC but working in conjunction with the more community-based organisations that are crucial to this—and then also bringing that back to the more global-oriented conversations around the different IHL violations that are happening from a New York perspective.

The programmes add a buffer to some of the root causes that we need tackled in order to prevent this from happening in the first place, but when they are happening, they also play a role in holding the balances in check and exposing that more quickly, which is very important when dealing with the rise in tension and violence in different conflicts.

Q16 Mr Bacon: You know that the FCDO has recently set up a conflict centre to allow for a more integrated approach to conflict and instability, but it has yet to release details. What should this centre focus on and what should it address in its work?

Denisa Delić: It was really welcome to see that announced in the integrated review that was published last year, and we look forward to seeing the conflict centre's new conflict framework. It does not have to start from scratch. There has been great work from the old FCO, looking at the atrocity prevention paper that was published in 2019 and the Department's updated protection of civilians paper that was published in 2020.

Across those papers, there were four tools that spoke to a strong atrocity prevention approach. Of course, there are always things that could be done, but these need to be the minimum pillars in the conflict centre's approach. They are: establishing early warning mechanisms to identify risk, instability, conflict and atrocities; using diplomacy to help de-escalate tensions and resolve disputes; funding development and programmatic support to address the root causes that I just mentioned; and making sure that it is integrated and linking up with, for example, the Ministry of Defence and using the defence and policing tools. That could include things like deployments of UK armed forces to assist with training or capacity-building in the security sector.

These four tools sit across everything from the minor violations to the full-blown atrocities. Of course, atrocities also happen in peacetime settings, and it was really welcome to see that recognised more explicitly in the integrated review. The IRC works on IHL violations that are solely based in armed-conflict settings but that can act as a precursor or red flag. Tackling one immediately enables you to tackle the other, and that



would be a good approach to build on in the conflict centre's new framework.

Q17 **Mr Bacon:** The FCDO already has several agendas that may be relevant to atrocity prevention, such as human rights and the rule of law, preventing sexual violence in conflicts, women, and peace and security. How do you see the relationship between atrocity prevention and this other ongoing work developing?

Denisa Delić: As I mentioned, some of the tools that you would use in atrocity prevention—particularly the four that I just outlined—would really help. While the strands are similar and overlap in some ways, there are differences, and those gaps should absolutely be plugged, but I would say that preventing sexual violence in conflict, strengthening accountability mechanisms and strengthening civilian protection all require the FCDO's development and diplomatic assets working hand in hand together to tackle and prevent these drivers and to utilise the diplomatic muscle to resolve them when they are happening. I can go into what some of our recommendations are if there is time.

It is also about working with civil society groups. It is really welcome to see the new Foreign Secretary already meeting international development and humanitarian sector representatives in London. It is both the assets and the engagement with civil society that are crucial, not just for atrocity prevention but also for civilian protection, PSVI and some of the other agendas that the FCDO focuses on, such as media freedom.

Chair: Thank you very much. Witnesses, that has been really helpful. We have asked for a couple of things to be followed up in writing. We also have your reports, which we will refer to. Thank you for your time today. Please keep in touch.

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Savita Pawnday and Natalie Samarasinghe.

Q18 **Chair:** We are joined by Savita and Natalie. I wonder if you could both introduce yourselves, starting with Natalie. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your organisation, please?

Natalie Samarasinghe: Thanks so much for inviting me to this session. I am the CEO of the United Nations Association—UK. We are the only British charity that is devoted to making the UN more inclusive, accountable, transparent and, ultimately, effective, and helping it to achieve its objectives. We feel that, even though the UN's objectives are very big, the one thing that will really devalue the whole experiment in international organisations is atrocities, if we fail in that very fundamental promise to protect people. That is why we have made atrocity prevention a priority.



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We are members of the International Coalition for R2P, so we look across the UN at how it is working on atrocities, and at how the UK is working at the UN in different fora, not just the Security Council. We are also members of the atrocity prevention working group. Let me just say that it is wonderful that the co-ordinator of that working group, Dr Kate Ferguson, is advising this Committee. I am going to be borrowing quite a lot from her work.

Q19 Chair: We are very grateful for her involvement. Thank you very much for recognising that. Savita, could you introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about your organisation, please?

Savita Pawnday: Good afternoon, everyone, and good morning; I am based out of New York, so it is still early in the day. I am the executive director of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. We are an organisation whose mission is to prevent and halt atrocity crimes—genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity.

We work at the multilateral level in New York as well as in Geneva. We do that through advocacy with UN member states in both New York and Geneva and other multilateral fora by producing and publishing analysis on how a particular situation is evolving into an atrocity situation; by supporting institutional mechanisms that can institutionalise atrocity prevention within Governments through the global network of R2P focal points, which the UK Government are part of; by being the secretariat for the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect; and by being the secretariat of the UN-based Group of Friends of R2P, which is based in both New York and Geneva and has over 50 member states. We work on preventing and halting atrocity crimes and in the promotion of the norm of the responsibility to protect.

Chair: Thank you. We have a series of questions. We will direct them to one or other of you, but if either of you wants to come in with a supplementary or additional information, or even to disagree, if you wave your hand, we will bring you in. We are quite limited on time.

Q20 Chris Law: Savita, UN member states collectively agreed their responsibility to protect in 2005—a commitment, as has already been mentioned today, known as R2P. Can you tell me what the practical consequences of that are and maybe give one or two examples of its being used successfully to prevent atrocities?

Savita Pawnday: As you said, in 2005, 150 heads of state came together and agreed upon the norm of the responsibility to protect. This was an institutional innovation in the way we think about protection norms, because it is very much based on the idea of sovereignty as responsibility and on the idea that sovereignty is not *carte blanche* to do whatever you want with your population within your borders. It was an institutional innovation and, over the last 15 years, R2P has been instrumental in energising the discussions on atrocity prevention. The kinds of institutional innovations that we have seen include the



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appointment of the special adviser, the report of the Secretary-General and the reports of the Secretary-General on the responsibility to protect.

We have seen over 80 resolutions in the Security Council that mention R2P. In the Human Rights Council, we have seen over 60 resolutions. In the General Assembly, R2P is a norm that is consistently voted on and is one of the norms that has been voted on the most. Generally, the way that the votes land is that a two-thirds majority within the UN vote positively on R2P.

That is how it happens within the UN system, but over the last 15 years what we have seen is a consciousness around R2P within UN member states. We can see this in the way UN peacekeeping missions have been authorised in Mali as well as in CAR, following atrocities, or the way that the UN membership has come together when we have seen, in Syria as well as in Myanmar, a deadlocked Security Council, where you have member states within the General Assembly coming together and establishing mechanisms that can collect and preserve evidence for the future prosecution of atrocity crimes, with independent mechanisms in Syria as well as in Myanmar.

We have seen the UK take the lead on different issues. UNITAD was established as a team to investigate the crimes committed by Daesh and ISIL in Iraq. It was very much the UK's leadership that led to the establishment of UNITAD, which is about prosecuting atrocity crimes, and specifically those committed against Yazidis. In recent times, this last year, following the Sudan coup on 25 October, again the UK led the process in Geneva in the establishment of an expert on Sudan.

There are many different ways in which states are implementing R2P, across early warning and in different ways through accountability mechanisms. On Ethiopia, which is a situation that we are all very heartbreakingly seeing evolve into a national crisis, we have again seen member states come together and establish investigative mechanisms, which at least keep account of what is happening on the ground. As our previous evidence presenter said, it is very important to monitor what is happening in the country and to collect evidence.

We have seen recent examples of universal jurisdiction; we are seeing Germany and Argentina, under the principle of universal jurisdiction, prosecuting individuals for crimes of genocide and crimes against humanity.

Chair: Savita, could I pause you there? You have obviously had your coffee this morning and you are giving us loads of information. Let us pause you, so that we can pick away at some of the detail.

Q21 **Chris Law:** I have a couple of questions on my mind. First, over the last 15 years, we have seen, if I am not mistaken, an increasing level of atrocities globally. I wanted to ask what the significance is of a resolution that mentions R2P. Does it allow for stronger measures? My follow-up to



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that is about whether we are expecting to see a continued increase in atrocities around the world. Where do you see atrocities trending in the future, given the fact that they have increased over the last 15 years? What is going to originate those atrocities? Will it be climate conflict, for example, or scarcity of resources?

Savita Pawnday: A short answer is everything that you outlined. Climate change is definitely a threat multiplier. Backsliding on democracy and on institutions that guarantee individual freedoms across the world is a cause for concern, as is increased marginalisation and hate speech. It is not as if hate speech has not existed before, but with the social media platforms and the permissive environments that have been created within many countries—I come from India, and I have seen those there—there is an environment of permissiveness. In Europe, you are seeing it across Poland and Hungary.

All these factors taken together point to a heightened risk of atrocities across the board. As was stated in the previous evidence, atrocity crimes are not only happening within conflict situations. Just last year, my colleagues provided evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on Myanmar and Xinjiang, China. Neither of these are conflict situations, but in these situations what we are seeing is that the Government are the perpetrator and are very much bent on demonising a particular community and committing genocide against them.

Just last year, the global centre looked at 29 countries where atrocities either are happening or are imminent. In the context of where I see R2P in these resolutions going, in the end we are living in an environment where impunity is rampant, where every human right or human rights-oriented norm or protection-oriented norm is under attack. The resolutions themselves do not have that kind of agency. What we see is a lack of political will. We have seen the emergence of spoilers like Russia and China, whereby violations of the oldest norms, such as the use of chemical weapons in Syria, are going completely unpunished. This is one of the oldest-held norms in the international community.

What I am seeing across the board is multiple threat multipliers, from climate change to backsliding in democracy and basic attacks on individual freedoms.

Q22 **Chris Law:** You mentioned social media and its role in communicating hate speech, for example. With R2P, is there any accountability for social media companies? You mentioned Myanmar, where we know that Facebook was the sole means of communication, which led to the Rohingya exodus. Is any responsibility held to private companies, such as social media companies, as well as to national state actors?

Savita Pawnday: R2P is a state-centric norm, so—you answered the question—it is very much the responsibility of different states and of the international community coming together. The UN has recently appointed



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somebody who is going to be dealing with digital technologies and social media platforms.

My advice to most Governments, when I talk to them, is to think about and evaluate their own hate speech laws and their laws around hate crimes, and, at an individual level and through their regional organisations, to hold private companies responsible. The EU has done a fantastic job in coming up with guidelines and in its dealings with social media companies. The onus lies very much with states themselves.

Social media companies have started to do this, under a lot of pressure. We have seen Facebook make some changes in their policy, but all this still remains very ad hoc. We would like to see states taking the onus for holding social media companies responsible, but also constantly building consensus within society, through national dialogue, community city halls and just community outreach. We would like to see a culture where you are building a consensus on the core value of the society in which you live, and the core value of the society that you live in is human rights—respecting the rights of migrants and minority groups. Hate speech is not only a problem that emanates from the proliferation of social media platforms; it is about how society views the different groups that live within it.

Q23 Nigel Mills: Can I take you back a couple of minutes? You mentioned Russia and China and their role on the Security Council. Is it a real problem for R2P when either members of the Security Council or their friends are committing atrocities and, therefore, they use or threaten to use their veto? Does it make the whole thing somewhat toothless? Do we need to find a better way of handling these situations?

Savita Pawnday: You are absolutely right. I have been working in this sphere for over 15 years, and the gridlocks that I have seen in the Security Council in the last 10 years, through the crises in Syria, Myanmar, Ethiopia and Yemen—the list is ongoing—are really tragic. The UN Security Council is the primary institution that deals with international peace and security, so for that institution to be so toothless at this time, when we are living in a time of impunity and in a culture where, across the board, we have seen a rise in atrocity crimes, is really problematic.

What we have also seen is that different avenues and fora, like the UN Human Rights Council, as well as the UN General Assembly, are now taking the charge. Recently, with colleagues from Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and Yemen-based organisations, the global centre made an appeal to the UN General Assembly to create an accountability mechanism that could monitor crimes that are being committed in Yemen.

As I mentioned earlier, we have seen the creation of innovative mechanisms, like the independent mechanism on Syria as well as on Myanmar. At a time when there is not much that can be done, at least they are collecting and preserving evidence in such a way that a chain of



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custody can be maintained, so that, five or 10 years from now, this evidence can be used in criminal prosecutions.

We are seeing Governments coming together in different ways either to hold perpetrators responsible or to establish facts of history as atrocities are ongoing. There is really no alternative to the shark-tooth measures that the UN Security Council could take, but in their absence and in the gridlock that we are facing right now, we are seeing member states coming up with different ideas. I must commend the role of organisations like mine and civil society organisations that are at the forefront of thinking about these kinds of innovative mechanisms, presenting them to Governments, and even thinking about the votes that are needed to get something passed. We are all collectively working together to find ways in which we can effect some change on the ground.

Q24 Nigel Mills: Natalie, do you have any remarks that you would like to make on the role of Russia and China? In addition to that, can you tell me what you think of the role that the UK plays on the Security Council and whether you think we are making the right decisions on when to act and when to veto, or whether we are getting it wrong at times?

Natalie Samarasinghe: I do not think that the UK has used its veto for a while, which is a good thing. Having signed up to codes of conduct saying that they will not use their veto, to prevent atrocities, that is very good. In general, on country-specific situations, whether at the Security Council or the Human Rights Council, the UK is usually an important ally for us to be working with. Savita has given some great examples of when UK leadership has been very positive.

The issues come when there are allies of the UK. Saudi Arabia and Yemen is a situation that lots of people have talked about. We have given evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee on this. That is when it sometimes becomes a bit more difficult. I do not think that there are any situations involving human rights where there is not some level of hypocrisy, if you want to call it that, by Governments. That should not stop the UK from being the champion that it is.

I would add a couple of things to what Savita said. First, even though gridlock is difficult, the Security Council still needs to be the site of the effort. The effort needs to be made, because if you have a resolution that is vetoed by one or two states, that still conveys some sense of collective view and legitimacy. More importantly, it can provide impetus for the UN General Assembly to take something on when it is manifestly not being progressed at the Security Council level.

In general, the UK could do more to promote that kind of activity. There is sometimes reticence on the part of all permanent members of the Security Council to go to other fora, because they do not have veto privileges in those other bodies. More and more, the UK, the US and others are seeing the value of going to the General Assembly, of using the Human Rights Council and, indeed, of using the wider network of UN



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offices. That is perhaps what gets lost in the focus on the Security Council.

The worst thing that happened to R2P is that it immediately became associated with liberal interventionism and militarism, which means that all the focus is on the Security Council. It is about looking at the national level and what the UN and UK presence in country can do to take preventive action, because by the time it has reached the Security Council it is usually too late. Working on the foresight, analysis and preventive capacity on the ground is a huge area that the UK can support in its own offices, but so is strengthening the UN's capacity to do so and pushing back against the member states who really do not want UN country offices that have traditionally been more focused on development to get into this space.

Q25 **Chair:** Can you give us any examples of where atrocity prevention has worked? This time last year, this Committee was pushing for measures by the UK Government in Ethiopia. A few years ago, it was China and the Uyghur. A few years before that, it was Myanmar and the Rohingya. We are good at having outrage once it has happened, but can you give examples of where atrocity prevention has prevented persecution of a group of people? Please give us hope.

Savita Pawnday: Natalie, do you want to go, or should I?

Natalie Samarasinghe: You are probably better placed to comment on specific situations, but the ones that we usually refer to are the violence following the Kenyan elections in 2007 and 2008, and the Colombian peace process. There was a lot of potential in that situation for there to be atrocities in the process of disarming groups and so on. That was handled well, with intentionality by the international community. It is a very controversial one to bring up, but to a certain point Libya was a good example. What happened after the resolution was adopted by the Security Council and how it was discharged, and then the prioritisation of the actions vis-à-vis democracy-building, constitution-building and stability is where the issue came.

If I may just make a broader point, that is why Savita's distinction of conflict, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention is so important. In these sorts of situations, the kneejerk reaction is to prize stability. If impunity is one of the factors that lead to atrocities, you could be bolstering a perpetrator by doing that. Conversely, if you are looking at preventing a communal violence situation and you say, "Bring everyone to the table. Everyone needs to disarm," you could be leaving a group very vulnerable, if the reason that they took up arms is precisely because they feared atrocities. Having that atrocity prevention lens on things helps to sequence and prioritise interventions. I am sure that Savita has other examples.

Savita Pawnday: Natalie, that is fantastic. Building on what you said, Kenya is definitely one of the successes of R2P. No country is perfect, but



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it still led to some long-term constitutional reforms, so that was fantastic. The way that the whole process came about was through mediation. Kofi Annan called it R2P in practice.

The other case that gives us a lot of hope is the case of the Gambia, where just five years ago you had a President who refused to step down and was basically threatening atrocities across the board, and you had ECOWAS coming together, also with the support of the UN Security Council, basically compelling him to step down. The dividend from that action has been that the Gambia, as the smallest country in Africa, has basically taken Myanmar to court on the commission of genocide against Rohingya. That is another very positive case.

In other ways, I would like to point out that there is a general consciousness around atrocity prevention and atrocity crimes. That is useful in thinking about positive cases. Another case I would like to point out is Burundi. Is it perfect? Not really, but because of the effort of the international community and regional organisations over the years in reforming and training the security sector, the situation is not as bad as it could get. Those are some of the successes that I take. Nothing is a complete success and nothing is a complete failure, but it is about picking and choosing what has worked in protecting populations.

In terms of UN peacekeeping, we have seen a lot of innovation in the DRC and South Sudan on protection of civilians that peacekeepers have been able to manage, where peacekeepers are the only thing standing between certain death for huge parts of the population. Within UN peacekeeping we have seen more and more understanding of situational awareness and how we can think about early warning in a way that takes into account atrocity risks. I would look at all of these things from the perspective of success.

In terms of breaking silos, that work is ongoing, and I would urge the FCDO to think more seriously about that, to include atrocity prevention as a priority distinct from conflict prevention, development policy and human rights promotion or democracy promotion. In Myanmar, we were caught off guard, to a great extent. Well, I would not say "caught off guard", because organisations like mine and many organisations in the UK were constantly giving early warnings around atrocity risks for the Rohingya way before 2017. Now, what we are seeing in Myanmar is basically that impunity begets more violence. That is what we are seeing there.

I would urge the UK Government to think very seriously about integrating an atrocity prevention lens in its policy. That means not only listing it in White Papers and policy papers but creating the right kinds of posts and training embassy staff, as well as staff engaged in early warning horizon scanning in London, New York and all the posts that are relevant, and also breaking silos in other protection agendas. You cannot protect the population holistically if you only look at it through one lens. As Natalie very succinctly pointed out, you cannot just look at it through a conflict



resolution lens; you have to look at it from the perspective of how you are protecting vulnerable populations, women, boys, girls and men.

So basically, break silos, institutionalise atrocity prevention, do not club it in with democracy promotion and conflict prevention or development policy. Look at it as a distinct area, because atrocity crimes have very particular risk factors, from marginalisation to hate speech to incitement. I will stop there.

Chair: We love it. You are writing the report for us. We just need to get a transcript of what you are saying.

Q26 **Mr Sharma:** Savita, in your organisation's work on R2P focal points, what different national approaches have you observed to atrocity prevention?

Savita Pawnday: That is a fantastic question. We have seen many. There are 61 countries and two regional organisations within the focal points network. Some are more effective than others. It is a mixed bag, as it always is with these kinds of networks. A very good example is Ghana. I always bring it up. Ghana has something called a National Peace Council, which it established as an independent body. It is not really a Government body. I think it is funded by the home country but it remains independent. The National Peace Council is a body that has come together to address tensions that arise from elections.

As we all know, in many situations atrocity crimes happen when elections are very close or there is a perception within the country that it is a zero-sum game in terms of who wins what kinds of seats. Ghana is one of those countries that has 0.01% differences in its electoral politics, and the National Peace Council has been an instrumental organisation, which has come together to calm tensions, brought politicians together and mediated differences. The head of the National Peace Council is the focal point from Ghana. That is a fantastic approach.

Across the board, in many places, we have officials who are part of the Foreign Ministry or Justice Ministry. It is very diverse in countries. In many European countries, you approach atrocity prevention and R2P very much from the lens of foreign policy or development policy. There we have seen innovative ways in which focal points have implemented R2P.

One of my favourite examples is that, even if the focal point is from the Foreign Ministry or the Development or Human Rights Ministry, they present their country's peer review to the Human Rights Council. As you know, every country has to present a review on its human rights situation through the universal periodic review, which takes place in Geneva. Many a time, focal points will call me and tell me, "Can you ask some other countries to ask my Government about atrocity prevention policies, because that will then energise my system in taking this seriously?"



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There are different ways in which the network has worked. It still has a long way to go, but through forums like this and our conversations with you, I hope that—

Q27 Mr Sharma: I think this is the right place for me to ask you how engaged you find the UK within this network.

Savita Pawnday: The UK has been very open and very engaged, especially in the context of particular country situations, so across the board in Afghanistan, Syria and Myanmar. You already know some of the concerns that we have consistently raised with the UK regarding Yemen. The UK has been very committed and very engaged within the multilateral sphere.

Mr Sharma: I think Natalie disagrees with that.

Natalie Samarasinghe: I would not say I disagree. I agree that the focal point has always been engaged and has good stuff. My issue is about the extent to which the focal point is heard when the UK is making decisions in policy discussions around what to do in Ethiopia or Myanmar. We would like to see the focal point elevated at Cabinet level, at the National Security Council, and backed by resources. Lots of people have been critical of the amalgamation of the FCDO and we have some concerns, but we actually think it is an excellent opportunity for the focal point and for atrocity prevention more generally to be elevated and to have a proper cross-Government approach.

I found that, when we asked the question—often before these meetings—“What have you done?” we get a very impressive list, but it is a bit of a mish-mash. It feels like someone said, “What are all the things we could potentially badge as atrocity prevention? Let us list them,” and it sounds very impressive. It is impressive, but with greater intentionality, the impact of these very different interventions would actually have the desired outcomes. So often, it is a bit of education here, a bit of hate speech there, a bit of security sector training, and there is no prioritisation, sometimes even on what countries these interventions are happening in. It is probably because there were some existing projects.

Conversely—this may be where I have a bit of nuance with Savita—with the international approach, sometimes you can get into the discussions around labels and it becomes a bit performative. They say, “This is what we are doing on R2P” and so on, but it does not cut through when it counts. That goes back to the question about whether it matters if a resolution mentions R2P.

If we had more intentionality at the national level but did what it takes at the international level to get these interventions through—I do not mean interventions in the military sense, of course—and in retrospect we could say, “Actually, they added up to R2P,” that would be quite a good approach for the UK to take.

Q28 Mr Sharma: Thank you, Natalie. Lastly, Savita, are there any examples



of national best practice or guiding principles on what works best?

Savita Pawnday: If you asked me if one particular policy was able to halt atrocities in one particular country, I would not be able to come up with that. I am going to be very generalised in my response. Just taking the example of the US, institutions matter. In cases and in countries, in situations where institutions have been strong, backsliding and the commission of atrocity crimes have been prevented. Where parliamentary systems are strong and are able question the Executive in a particular way, we have seen the risk of atrocity crimes lessen.

In situations where we have seen the Head of State or the Head of Government and across the board coming together and prosecuting and addressing discriminatory speech and not allowing the creation of a permissive environment where hate speech flourishes, we have seen atrocity crimes prevented.

This is a very generalised answer, but that is what I would say in terms of many of the principles of good governance in the end, which address marginalisation and discriminatory practices. The way that you look at freedom of religion is so important. In the context of Europe, religion is considered something that is limited to personal space. That is problematic and does not promote tolerance. There are countries where we have seen more of an embrace of freedom of religion and an embrace of populations publicly showing what religion they are. Those are just general practices across the board that I would highlight.

The final thing, given this inquiry, is in the context of Bosnia. I would say that addressing genocide denial and acknowledging past atrocities is so important in countries that are emerging or have a history of atrocity crimes.

Q29 **Mr Bacon:** Can I start by asking Natalie to unpack a bit more what she said earlier about moving from a mish-mash to a cross-Government strategy? If it stops being a mish-mash and starts being a coherent cross-Government strategy, what would be the difference? What would it look like? What would be the priorities?

Natalie Samarasinghe: There are some general priorities I could set out, but one of the priorities would be to really invest in the networks, with communities and funding community organisations. We heard about this in the previous session. Ultimately, you have general principles, but it is about knowing when to prioritise certain interventions and in what order they should come. It is sequencing and prioritisation. What I mean by that is, when you are in, for example, a post-conflict situation or coming out of conflict, do you push for constitution, democracy, elections? Are you looking at disarming groups? Are you looking at beefing up the security sector?

We have different responses in situations, and a very intentional atrocity prevention strategy will help with looking at when all these interventions,



which are incredibly laudable, should come, in a way that does not increase the risks to vulnerable populations but actually minimises them, also helping with the funding of local groups and helping local groups access international funds. Looking back at the previous session, it is not just about having outcomes that are hard to prove; it is also about the hoops and the number of forms. Most local peacebuilding and human rights groups would not even know where to begin to fill those in, and they probably would not meet the threshold. That is part of that.

It is about finding this balance between not looking at atrocity prevention narrowly as part of conflict, which it is not, but also not looking at it in such a generalised way that it just becomes development. I found the words of the former High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid, very striking. He said that wars do not start because people are poor. There are clearly some factors, and Savita has mentioned some of them, such as marginalisation and identity-based grievances.

Q30 **Mr Bacon:** Was that “warzones start when people are poor”?

Natalie Samarasinghe: Wars do not start because people are poor. We get into the habit of saying that prevention of atrocities is anything to do with development. That is what I meant with the mish-mash list of UK atrocity prevention. It might be supporting some very laudable civic education projects in one country; it might be supporting training of the security forces in another. I question that on two levels. First, why are these particular interventions happening in particular countries? Sometimes the answer is not because they are particularly vulnerable to atrocities or even conflict, but because that is something the Government there is interested in or because that is where there has already been a development project, because it is easy in a particular region. There are lots of reasons, if we are honest, why these programmes get funding.

The other reason why I question that is that we seem to have this list of things that constitute atrocity prevention that we apply to any situation, whereas in fact it might be much more appropriate to focus on stability in certain situations and definitely not in others, where perhaps the Government are liable to perpetrate them. It is about making sure that atrocities are part of the conversation.

People are very quick to dismiss the appointment of a focal point, whether that is on R2P or atrocities or human rights, but I have worked at the UN over the past two years and I see how the conversation changes because there is a High Commissioner for Human Rights, or because there is a youth envoy. I hope there will be a civil society envoy at some point soon, because that is when people all around the table suddenly see that person, see their office, see their framework and say, “We need to get switched on to this.” That is why the special adviser’s office is so important at the UN, too. It does make a difference in terms of raising the profile, but also in terms of looking at which particular policy responses should matter in the meantime.



Q31 **Mr Bacon:** The Chair mentioned some miserable examples that we are only too familiar with: the Rohingya, Yemen and the Uyghur. There is no lack of knowledge and familiarity, and yet any number of warm words do not seem to have changed much.

Two examples spring to mind where atrocity prevention worked. I am conscious that you mentioned that the responsibility to protect had become conflated with liberal interventionism, for very obvious reasons, since Tony Blair's 1999 Chicago speech and then what happened in Iraq. It is hardly difficult to understand why the two should have become conflated, but is it not also the case that two of the most successful atrocity preventions that come to mind, Kosovo and Sierra Leone, were done entirely outside the framework of international law, not because of but despite international organisations, because of the determination of individual actors to stop atrocity in a way that worked? In one case, that was Tony Blair and Charles Guthrie, who was the general in charge, and in the other it was NATO with Kosovo, outside the framework of the UN. That is true, is it not?

Natalie Samarasinghe: Yes. The UN is not the answer to absolutely everything.

Q32 **Mr Bacon:** Forgive me, but you have spent a lot of time talking about how we are going to get from a mish-mash to something more coherent, and you did actually say at one point, "I do not mean intervention in the military sense, of course," but is it not true that sometimes, actually, a military intervention is the best thing to do? The two examples I have just given are probably examples of that.

Natalie Samarasinghe: Yes. The principle of R2P does have that as one of the pillars. The primary responsibility to protect the population lies with their own Government. If they are not able or not willing to discharge it, then the international community can take a range of actions, of which military intervention is one.

Q33 **Mr Bacon:** You mentioned the UN and that you see what happens around the table when the UNHCR is present and so on. Are you saying that by elevating it in these various fora, and simply by every member state Government placing it much higher up the agenda, you can achieve real change on the ground without military intervention more often? Is that what you are saying?

Natalie Samarasinghe: It is difficult to talk about success stories in the same way as you talk about success stories when you have had to have a military intervention, because by the time you get to that point atrocities have already been committed. I do not want to make the generalised point, because I am sure this Committee has heard it before, but prevention is less costly in financial and human terms. By the time you get to the stage where you need a military intervention, all sorts of other factors come into play, including political ones.



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The point about acting outside the UN and outside international law is an interesting one. It is easy, in retrospect, to look at interventions as having gone well or not. I gave the example of Libya, where, actually, processes were followed and the intervention itself was successful and did what it set out to achieve, but then what happened afterwards? That was the problem. The issue is that, when the UK and others do that, it is quite difficult not to see it as normalising other actors. Russia and China have been mentioned, and Russia would be the prime example of this; it makes exactly the same argument.

That is not to say that there is never a case or a reason for it, but it is the point I made earlier: even if you cannot get agreement, you need to try. You need to try, because if you try and fail at the Security Council, you still have that legitimacy; you still have that sense that this is a collective action. That was tried, to some extent, in Kosovo, and that is probably why you list it now as a success. I do not think it is a black or white scenario. I would never say military action is always wrong, but it is about how we get there. There are a lot of other things that can and should happen before we get to that point.

Q34 **Mr Bacon:** You are saying that more of them could be happening sooner than is currently the case.

Natalie Samarasinghe: Yes.

Savita Pawnday: I would go back to the word “intentionality”, which Natalie used. That is such an important word in this context. It is about having a comprehensive UK strategy for atrocity prevention that includes every tool in the toolbox. It is about training posts. It is about using your civil society actors, Kate Ferguson and others in the UK who are specialists on UK foreign policy but also understand atrocity prevention so well. It is about leveraging that capacity and expertise to understand what kinds of programmes you need to implement on the ground that could prevent atrocity crime. It is not just about having good governance programmes in general and then that will prevent atrocities.

Further to Natalie’s point, in the last few years there have been situations where we have seen atrocities committed in Myanmar and Ethiopia. These are countries that have actually seen a huge advancement on development. Again, going back to Zeid’s point, it is not about poverty; it is about thinking very intentionally about what kind of development policy is needed, and the inclusion of an atrocity prevention lens within the policy is actually useful in preventing atrocities.

I just want to bring up the situation in Afghanistan. A very state-centric approach to development policy in terms of preventing atrocities is problematic, because in Afghanistan right now, with the collapse of the Government, we are seeing that there are not many avenues through which we are able to reach communities. If the avenues through which development policy is implemented also take into account communities, civil society and local organisations, even with the collapse of the



Government, there would have been avenues; there would have been very direct ways in which the Afghan people could have been helped. That is something that the development industry in general has to think about, in terms of how they work with community programmes.

On military intervention, it is great to have that tool in the toolbox. It is absolutely essential in many situations, but I feel we still have a hangover from the 1990s. In the situation in Rwanda or in Bosnia, a military intervention and a no-fly zone would have helped. In most situations that we are seeing right now, military intervention is just not the right tool. It is not the right diagnosis for the problem. In Myanmar or Ethiopia, boots on the ground doesn't pan out. We need national dialogue. We need to compel the Government to recognise the Rohingya as part of the citizenry.

In situations like DRC or South Sudan, where the conflict has been going on for such a long time, it is such a multi-dimensional conflict and crisis that military intervention at this point is not actually the right tool. The approach is carrots and sticks to the Government and to different perpetrators.

Q35 **Chris Law:** What should be the UK's priorities in relation to R2P and atrocity prevention? What are the key priorities?

Natalie Samarasinghe: I am not going to talk about particular country priorities or regions. Savita is better placed to do that. At the UK level, it is many of the things that have been mentioned already, such as making atrocity prevention a strategic priority itself. Within the new conflict centre, I would echo what Denisa said in the previous session but perhaps highlight some other things. Investing in a foresight and analysis capacity is really key to this. That includes engaging with the communities, civil society and so on in providing some of that analysis and intelligence on the ground. Afghanistan was a very complex and messy situation. I am not going to pretend that information from those sources would have solved everything, but there were clearly some intelligence failures that that kind of intensive relationship building and community link cultivation could have avoided.

Another priority should be looking at how the UK acts across different international fora and different parts of the UN, so looking at that cascade from when things need to happen at a regional level to how they travel through the UN system, through the human rights mechanisms and through the Human Rights Council itself. How do they go from Geneva to New York, when they get elevated and become risks to peace and security? That would be really interesting.

To some extent, we also need to look more broadly than the FCDO. I am talking about looking properly cross-Government at development, foreign and defence, but also at what our asylum policy is like when we are looking at populations that are fleeing atrocities. It is really important to keep some of those broader issues in mind, as well as issues relating to



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organised crime. When you look at how some Governments and the perpetrators of atrocities operate, they are often linked to and operate in a very similar way to criminal gangs. If you look at accountability, that needs to straddle how the money is flowing through. London and the UK is a centre for that. There are lots of different parts of the Government that need to be brought together in an audit of what could be the most useful. That would be really helpful.

There are a range of actions at the UN. At the Security Council, anything that could be done to make sure that the right officials and the right voices, from the UN itself but also from outside, can brief the UN Security Council and other mechanisms. It has been terrible that there is a practice of people being blocked from even talking to the council. That seems to be continuing. The elected members of the Security Council should be engaged. If there is a need for performative resolutions that none the less signal intent, that has some value.

We need to look at how to strengthen the offices of the special advisers on the prevention of genocide, atrocity prevention and R2P, but also the human rights machinery of the UN itself. Human rights is supposed to be one of the three priorities of the UN, with development and peace and security, but I think the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights gets about 3% of the UN's funding. There is a strong argument to bolster its political presence in New York as well. That separation of New York and Geneva really hampers some of the effective UN action on that.

Finally, at the country level, it is about really looking at what the UN country officers are doing. Those tend to be development-focused. The Secretary-General has made an effort to make sure that they integrate atrocities and human rights concerns in their work. There is a hell of a lot of push-back from other countries. Because of its still strong development funding role, the UK can play a real role here in strengthening that and making sure that those offices are engaging with monitoring hate speech, engaging religious leaders, engaging communities and providing that intelligence to headquarters, and then the UK should do more to ensure that that intelligence is heard and acted on by UN officials.

Savita Pawnday: I echo all the points that Natalie has raised, and I underline the point that there has to be intentionality in terms of investment in atrocity prevention from the UK Government, not only in foreign affairs but in development, trade and defence. In the context of Yemen, the responsibility to protect also goes towards denying perpetrators means to perpetrate atrocities. Again, on the UK's defence and trade deals with Saudi and others, it is really important that—the UK has had a very principled position across Syria, Myanmar and many other situations, and we would hope to see a better position on accountability mechanisms and on mechanisms that can protect populations in Yemen and more broadly.



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Finally, you should leverage the expertise that you have in the UK on atrocity prevention; utilise your civil society partners in the new centre that you are creating intentionally; think about atrocity prevention not as something that is stand-alone but as something that breaks silos in how we think about protection more broadly; train embassy staff, and create skills within the Government to understand what the risk factors for atrocities are and how the dynamics of atrocities come about.

In Myanmar, I understand, and I have heard from people who watched the UK policy unfold, that it was very much the case that the post said something but what reached London was something else, and there was not any clear analysis of the atrocity risks that were very clear and present in Myanmar. Having that intentionality from your early warning horizon scanning, to your accountability, to the way you behave in the multilateral fora is important.

Q36 **Chris Law:** I have a last question for both of you, and it is a really big question, I am afraid. Given what we have discussed already, with the problems of social media, the problems in the UN and the problems with major cuts to the CSSF and ODA funding, how do you see the UK working creatively with its allies and partners to prevent atrocities in a constrained and increasingly unstable international environment?

Savita Pawnday: The answer to that question is everything that we have said through the entire conversation. If you have less funds, then it is about leveraging the allies and the partners that you have. It is about leveraging the expertise that exists in the UK and the kinds of partnerships that we can create across the board.

To give a very quick example, in the UN Security Council, as Natalie said, bring people to brief the High Commissioner for Human Rights and the Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide. Put your political capital towards securing those procedural votes, which then allows you to bring whoever you want to bring in terms of briefing in the council. The UK did a fantastic job in bringing the fact-finding mission on Myanmar to brief the council. That was not an easy task, but through its leadership, it was able to bring the FFM. That energised the system. That led to more sanctions from countries across the board towards Myanmar. You should use your political capital, working with disruptive elected members. The UK is the penholder on Myanmar and Yemen. Work with elected members who actually want to accomplish something in these countries.

In the HRC, again, support the mechanisms and the creation of investigative mechanisms on countries where atrocities are either imminent or happening. Use the UPR process in a smarter way. The first report that the Government presents is generally a result of massive consultations across the board in the UK, with different stakeholders. Genuinely present a report card to the world on the internal policies that the UK has adopted on hate speech, discrimination and all of these markers of atrocity prevention.



In terms of foreign policy and bilateral foreign policy, first, deny means to commit atrocities to perpetrators. We know the country I am speaking about. Do capacity building for your own staff and across the board with the organisations that you work with. Again, Natalie used the word “intentionality”; that is the most important process through which you are able to achieve the results you want. Diagnose the problem correctly and then create a policy that addresses atrocity prevention rather than just having abstract good governance policies.

Natalie Samarasinghe: I would echo that. We know what the tools and the steps are; it is about applying them in the correct way. I agree with what Savita has said, but I would add: be creative. We have talked a little about social media. There is an opportunity in 2023; the UN Secretary-General has proposed the creation of a global digital compact that would address a lot of these issues in a multifaceted way. It would be a multi-stakeholder compact. It is a legal nightmare to look at. In principle, social media companies and R2P are different frameworks, but something like a compact could take us some way down that path.

Related to that—obviously I am going to say this, but I think it matters here—is to strengthen multilateral. That is the way to maximise the return on investment. Look at the opportunities provided by the Secretary-General’s “Our Common Agenda” report, which is really a manifesto for strengthening multilateralism. Fund civil society again; that is how you are going to increase your capacity.

I have to say it: reverse the cuts. If you look at the grand scheme of things, where is the UK making its investments? You are talking about very small sums of money that are having a massive impact. We have the Commissioner-General of UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in Palestine. They have seen a 60% cut in funding from the UK since 2018. That is a prime situation where UNRWA is the thin blue line between not just atrocities but the stability of a whole region. Whatever can be done to reverse that and make the case to the UK public needs to be done. We tried to do it. I think the case can be made. This is global Britain. This is the way to define global Britain going forward—walk the talk and lead by example at home.

In terms of anything that the UK is trying to push for in terms of hate speech or treatment of minorities, its hand is strengthened when that is matched by good domestic policies and a robust domestic conversation.

Chris Law: Thank you, both, for your powerful statements. What you said there at the very end about reversing the cuts is very important.

Q37

Chair: Natalie, I know that you are leaving your role at the end of this week, and I wish you luck with your future job and future career. I am sure that you will not leave this area. Because of that, though, I hope that you are going to feel able to give us a very unedited answer to these questions that I am going to put to you. The UK Government see atrocity prevention pretty much only within a conflict situation. They have



recently committed to do all they can on atrocity prevention in non-conflict settings. What is your view on that?

Natalie Samarasinghe: That is great. We have seen the UK evolve from having a very narrow approach to atrocities to one that has looked much more at all the levers and factors that Savita has talked about—one that is much more open to seeing this outside the confines of conflict. In practice, part of the mish-mash of activities—I really did not mean that as a derogatory term—already recognises that. The UK is already making atrocity prevention interventions. It is about doing that with—it is that word again—more intentionality.

I was pleased about the creation of the conflict centre but surprised by the name—“conflict”.

Q38 **Chair:** Do you actually know what it is? Is it a building? Is it an individual? Have you been there? Do you know what its strategy is?

Natalie Samarasinghe: No. We would love to know more.

Chris Law: So would we.

Chair: So would this Committee, because it has been given as the answer to almost every question that we put around atrocity prevention, and it seems to be a mythical creature at the moment. You do not know any more about it than we do.

Natalie Samarasinghe: We do not know, and it surprises me, because there are not many groups that work on atrocity prevention, or indeed on peacekeeping and other issues, in the UK. I would have thought we would have been brought in at some point, even just to have an informal chat or something like that. We would welcome that. I am leaving, but my colleagues are there to take this forward.

We would love to sit down and talk about conflict prevention, peacekeeping in the UN, atrocities and human rights, and look at it in the round and have a bit of a brainstorming session. I have no idea how developed the plans are. I mentioned the name because it seems a little bit of a retrograde step, given the progress in thinking. There is actually a lot of good stuff in the integrated review that we are very excited about, but it is just not fleshed out. We would love to be part of that process. I very much hope that others have been. That is something we would love to be able to find out, maybe through this inquiry.

Q39 **Chair:** I find it odd that your organisation, given the pivotal role it plays, both in the UK and internationally on atrocity prevention, has not been consulted about the conflict centre. Does it surprise you that the UK does not have a definition of atrocities? Is that unusual, and does that hamper our response?

Natalie Samarasinghe: It is a bit unusual, given how well defined these terms are internationally. I do not think it behoves the UK to try to come up with its own definition. Let us not reverse the progress we have made



internationally in terms of norms, laws and standards by trying to do something ourselves. We should surely be making reference to international documents. Of course, the UK can say, "This is how we see these tools unfolding in x scenario." There is lots of room for policy options, but, on the definitional issue, it would only harm the UK to try to come up with its own definition. Indeed, it had one about military intervention. The UK's candidate for the International Law Commission, Dapo Akande, wrote a very good brief on why that was not perhaps the best approach by the UK, because once you start opening up things that have been agreed for definition, you are really not the only country that is going to be doing that.

Q40 Chair: I was interested that you mentioned the cross-Government response to this. The example you gave was asylum seekers. I thought that that was a very good example. If people are fleeing atrocities in their own country but the Home Office does not recognise that as a driver for that person landing on our shores, there might be a disparity in response. When we push the Government on implementing training on atrocity prevention across just the FCDO, they very much take the position that it is up to each individual agency and embassy to lead on that. Do you think that that is the right approach, or do you think that there should be at least cross-FCDO training and policy on spotting atrocities emerging? Should that be expanded across Government?

Natalie Samarasinghe: I think so, and the example I would draw on is actually from the UN. We had a situation that has definitely not been resolved yet, whereby staff working on the ground in countries like Sri Lanka and Myanmar were basically able to say, "Human rights really is not part of our brief." The way we have made progress on the UN side is that it is now formally part of the brief. A directive from the Secretary-General is filtered through all the directors of the different parts of the UN to say, "This is now a priority. It needs to be part of your training. It needs to be part of your job description. It needs to be part of your performance evaluation as well." You get change when you have that personal responsibility and accountability.

It may seem like going through the motions, but, torturous as it was, I am glad that, when I joined the UN, I had to sit through the 40 hours of self-learning on sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, corruption, human rights and all these issues, because it does make a difference. You cannot do certain things unless you have completed that training. That is how you embed it. It seems very painful and bureaucratic, but ultimately that is how the change happens. You will not now find a staff member in the UN who can really say that human rights is not part of their brief, and hopefully that can be the same for the UK with atrocities.

Q41 Chair: One of my concerns is that there are no votes in prevention; there is nothing to compel politicians to take it forward because they cannot really get a press release or claim credit for it. Why should the UK be working so hard on atrocity prevention? What is in it for us?



Natalie Samarasinghe: That is a really good question, and the UN has tried to answer it in different ways. Parking the moral imperative, we have tried to frame it in the sense of how interconnected the world is. Conflict is not the only situation from which atrocities emerge, but atrocities often lead to conflict. What does conflict lead to? It leads to instability. It can lead to a breakdown in crucial trade partners and so on. I am not a massive fan of the argument that it leads to refugee flows, but it is a powerful one here. I would much rather see a more positive case being made for that, but none the less there is that.

It is also about storytelling. You have had successive Governments that have wanted to show that the UK is a player internationally. There is the global Britain rhetoric, with Britain in a new age. What is that if it does not mean that Britain can stand up for its values and protect people?

It is also quite interesting that, when we poll the public here, I find that the UK's position on the Security Council is a key factor in what people perceive as the UK's power and influence abroad. You can really make a play of using that. These institutions that support UK power, as it were, being less able to deal with crises has a detrimental effect on impressions of the UK's standing as well. There are lots of arguments, from the very tangible security risk of extremism, instability, lack of trade, refugees and so on, over to what kind of country we want to be. That is a really interesting one, and clearly, in the last few years, there has been an issue. That needs to be part of a national conversation, as we find ourselves in the midst of this pandemic asking some very soul-searching questions about who we are and what we want to be like going forward.

Q42 **Chair:** This Committee is incredibly grateful and very proud of the development staff and embassy staff we have, and you mentioned our role in the Security Council. Do you think that all makes atrocity prevention quite a logical space for us to enter internationally? Do you think that there would be a logic if we took ownership of some of that space?

Natalie Samarasinghe: Yes, absolutely. The UK is in a position to provide a leadership role and a leading role. I am sympathetic and deeply aware, as someone who comes from a former colony, of the squeamishness that people sometimes feel, particularly in my sector, about the UK being forthright, but the UK has the power to do good, and it should. It is about doing it well, and sometimes it lessens the squeamishness that people have. You have the UK as part of these powerful fora in the UN; you have, in the aid budget, an incredible tool. It is funny, because if you ask the British public, they say the Security Council is the lever of influence internationally; if you ask most other countries, they say it is aid. When we were caught up in discussions about what kind of impact Brexit would have, you could argue that either way, but aid was the key factor to success. Britain is perfectly placed to really make an impact.

Q43 **Chair:** Savita, my last question is to you. We are honoured to have you



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here, because we know that you go all around the world, talking to Governments, politicians and agencies, persuading them of the importance of atrocity prevention and R2P in particular. What is your elevator pitch? What is your two-minute sell on why we should focus on atrocity prevention as opposed to all of the other demands on a politician's time?

Savita Pawnday: The elevator pitch is that these are conscience-shocking crimes. These are crimes that take away and affect our humanity as a whole. If we call ourselves an international community or a world where we care about these issues, it is absolutely imperative that R2P and atrocity prevention is a domestic policy imperative as well as a foreign policy imperative. The holocaust, the genocide in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia—all of these are stains on our collective conscience. There is no other argument. I do not even want to go down the argument of refugees and the financial argument or any of that; it is just that you should be doing this because you are a human being and you live in a society and an international community.

Chair: Savita and Natalie, thank you so much for your time. This has been our first session, and you have given us an excellent introduction and loads of evidence. Thank you very much for that.